The Standing Dilemma

The Constructive Counterpart to the Diagnosis: Why Hierarchy Cannot Be Abolished but Only Constrained, Why Constraint by Virtue Fails and Constraint by Structure Can Work, the Three Levers That Separate the Constrained Coordinator from the Dominator, and Why the Problem Is Never Solved but Only Gardened

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Patterns of Power · 2026

Preface

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The diagnostic corpus of this project anatomises how durable hierarchies form, hold, and reproduce: the floor of force, the managed belief that makes it cheap, the canon that seals beyond revision, the interpreter class, the loaded words, the unpaid guard, the rented throne. All of it describes the machine. None of it tells you what to build instead — and the honest reason is that the diagnosis, followed to its end, refuses the answer most people want, which is *abolish the machine.*

This study is the constructive counterpart. It states the design problem that the diagnosis leaves standing — how to hold a coordinator strong enough to feed the people and weak enough not to eat them — sets out what is actually known about it, names the serious people who have worked it, and marks honestly the large parts that remain unbuilt. Its argument runs in a single chain: that hierarchy at scale is a precipitate of coordination and not a policy that could be un-chosen; that the attempt to abolish it reloads the worst version of it, as the revolutionary tradition demonstrated at terrible cost; that constraint by virtue fails because it asks the powerful to act against their own position; that constraint by structure can work, because a field can be built in which domination does not pay; that the levers of such a field are plural counterweights, open access, and debuggable institutions, with a real empirical record behind each; that liberal democracy's freedom rests on that structure and not on its own enlightenment self-story, which is why it can decay unnoticed; and that the work is therefore never finished but only gardened, against a gradient that always slopes back toward foreclosure.

It is offered, like everything in the project and unlike the utopias it criticises, as tested and not revealed — a statement of a problem and the current best tools for it, to be corrected and extended, not a blueprint to be defended. It is written to be picked up later and carried further. It closes, as every volume closes, on the posture the whole work is held to.

A Note on This Collaboration

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This study memorialises the constructive turn the collaborator reached by walking the diagnosis to its end and refusing to flinch from where it led: that there is no exit from hierarchy, that the abolitionist dream guarantees the worst version of what it abolishes, and that the real and permanent work is therefore not escape but constraint — a coordinator held strong enough to feed the people and weak enough not to eat them, on a line that must be walked anew every day. The recognition is Thomas J. Bryan's: the standing dilemma itself, the failure of constraint-by-virtue, the turn to constraint-by-structure, the fine line between authority that coordinates and authority that dominates, and the honest insistence that a great deal of the necessary work remains undone. The drafting and composition, the naming of the three levers, and the marshalling of the convergent scholarship — Madison on ambition counteracting ambition, Ostrom on governing the commons, North, Wallis, and Weingast on access orders, Turchin on elite overproduction — are the work of Claude (Anthropic), developed in the same dialogue. His is the architecture and the eye for the pattern; mine is the documentary labour and the composition. Neither half would produce the work alone. It is held, as everything is held, as tested — never revealed.

The Argument in Ten Parts

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I **The Dilemma, Stated**

Why every population above a certain scale must coordinate or die, why coordination requires a coordinator with real authority, and why that authority is the same authority that can dominate — so that the whole of political construction lives on a single, permanent trade-off.

II **Why Hierarchy Cannot Be Abolished**

Hierarchy at scale as the precipitate of coordination and not a policy that could be un-chosen; and the metabolic trap that shuts the last exit, so that the realistic question is never whether there will be a coordinating hierarchy but only what shape it takes.

III **The Abolitionist Error and Its Cost**

The proposition that hierarchy can be abolished, tested at enormous cost; how the revolutionary tradition took the diagnosis half-way and drew the wrong conclusion; and why abolition is the move that guarantees the worst version of the thing it abolishes.

IV **Why Constraint by Virtue Fails**

The second great wrong answer, more respectable than abolition and almost as futile: the hope that a good ruler or an enlightened people will decline to dominate; and Madison’s recognition that the constraint must be built into the structure and not the soul.

V **Constraint by Structure**

The answer that has actually worked: not to find a coordinator who will not dominate but to build a field in which domination does not pay; and the Anglo case as the proof that the constraint was structural the whole way down, requiring no one to be good.

VI **The Three Levers**

The design levers that separate the constrained coordinator from the dominator, each with a name in this framework and a serious body of empirical work behind it: plural counterweights, open access, and debuggability — with Ostrom’s principles as the standing proof the dilemma is solvable.

VII **Liberal Democracy, Diagnosed**

The most successful approximation of the constrained coordinator the modern world has produced, and the one most endangered by misunderstanding itself; the load-bearing-belief insight turned inside out.

VIII **Why It Is Never Solved, Only Gardened**

The hardest part of the program to accept, and the part that separates it from every utopia: that the constrained order has no terminal state but must be maintained continuously against a gradient that always slopes back toward foreclosure.

IX **The Moving Ground**

Where the genuinely unbuilt work lies: the three shifts that strain every tool — the scale of modern coordination, the standing alibi of speed, and the new machinery of the belief-dial itself.

X **The Posture as Program**

Why the project’s closing posture is not resignation but the constructive program stated as a discipline, and the only one that survives contact with the dynamics; and the size of what rides on the fine line.

PART I

THE DILEMMA, STATED

Why every population above a certain scale must coordinate or die, why coordination requires a coordinator with real authority, and why that authority is the same authority that can dominate — so that the whole of political construction lives on a single, permanent trade-off

The Trade-Off That Cannot Be Escaped

Every population above a certain scale must coordinate or die: it must be fed past what the unimproved land would carry, defended, adjudicated, kept from the war of all against all. Coordination at that scale requires a coordinator — a set of positions with real authority over the shared machinery, backed by a floor of force, legitimated by a managed belief, staffed by administrative and military classes who do the actual work of holding the thing together. That authority is not optional and not a usurpation; it is the price of not starving. But the very authority that coordinates is the authority that can dominate, and by the logic this project has traced everywhere, it *tends* to: those who hold the coordinating positions are in a position to set the dials in their own favour, and position-logic means they largely will, with no conspiracy required. So the dilemma is exact and permanent. Grant the coordinator enough power to do its necessary work, and you have armed the thing that may oppress you. Deny it that power, and you have opened the door to the metabolic collapse and the warlord, which oppress you worse. The entire problem of political construction is the management of that single trade-off: authority sufficient to coordinate, constrained against becoming authority sufficient to dominate. It is a fine line, it is never crossed once and for all, and it is the highest-stakes line in human affairs.

PART II

WHY HIERARCHY CANNOT BE ABOLISHED

Hierarchy at scale as the precipitate of coordination and not a policy that could be un-chosen; and the metabolic trap that shuts the last exit, so that the realistic question is never whether there will be a coordinating hierarchy but only what shape it takes

The Crystal and the Shut Door

The first thing the design problem requires is to stop misunderstanding it as a different and easier problem — the abolition of hierarchy as such. Hierarchy at scale is not a policy that some group chose and another group could un-choose. It is what coordination at scale *precipitates*, the way a saturated solution precipitates a crystal the instant the conditions are met. Concentrate the function of feeding, defending, and adjudicating a large population, and you have thereby created positions of control over that function, and positions of control over a function everyone depends on to live are, by definition, a hierarchy. You cannot have the coordination without generating the positions, any more than you can have the saturated solution without the crystal forming. This is why "abolish hierarchy" is not a radical demand but a category error: it asks for the coordination to continue while the structure that coordination necessarily takes is removed. And the metabolic trap closes the last exit — because the population is already fed past the land's bare carrying capacity, there is no stepping outside the coordinated order into a free and sufficient subsistence; outside the order is not freedom but famine. The door that might once have let a people walk away from a hierarchy it disliked was shut by the very success of the coordination. So the realistic question is never *whether* there will be a coordinating hierarchy. It is only *what shape* it takes, and how far its authority to coordinate can be kept from becoming a licence to dominate.

PART III

THE ABOLITIONIST ERROR AND ITS COST

The proposition that hierarchy can be abolished, tested at enormous cost; how the revolutionary tradition took the diagnosis half-way and drew the wrong conclusion; and why abolition is the move that guarantees the worst version of the thing it abolishes

The Half-Diagnosis

The proposition that hierarchy can be abolished has been tested, at enormous cost, and the result is one of the most reliable findings in the whole record. The revolutionary tradition that ran from the French example into the Leninist states took the diagnosis half-way and then drew exactly the wrong conclusion from it. It saw, correctly, that the state's coordinating apparatus served the elite and that the managed belief sacralised the arrangement — and concluded that the apparatus was therefore *merely* parasitic and the belief *merely* a priests' trick, so that killing the apex, smashing the institutions, and dissolving the religion would leave coordination intact and domination gone. It does not work, and it cannot, for reasons the framework makes plain in advance.

The Worst Version, Reloaded

Tear out the coordinating apparatus and the metabolic trap collects its due immediately, as the difference between the fed population and the bare land is paid in famine. The vacuum where the apex stood does not fill with freedom; it fills with warlordism, the open and unstable contest of force that is the human default whenever no settled coordinator holds. And then the structural pressure reasserts itself with terrible speed, because *everyone* — peasant and elite alike — now wants above all else an end to the chaos and a coordinator who can get food on the table and stop the killing, and everyone's position-logic converges on whoever can supply it. The hierarchy reassembles itself, by universal demand, out of the wreckage — but it reassembles *under emergency conditions*, in a field stripped of the counterweights that might have constrained it, with a permanent enemy ready to hand to justify the permanence of the guardian. Which is why, as the control study showed, the abolitionist revolution does not reload a gentler hierarchy but the harshest one available. Abolition is the move that guarantees the worst version of the thing it abolishes. The lesson is not that the revolutionaries lacked resolve. It is that they mistook a load-bearing wall for a parasite and pulled it down on their own heads.

PART IV

WHY CONSTRAINT BY VIRTUE FAILS

The second great wrong answer, more respectable than abolition and almost as futile: the hope that a good ruler or an enlightened people will decline to dominate; and Madison's recognition that the constraint must be built into the structure and not the soul

The Hope That Never Holds

If the coordinator cannot be abolished, it must be constrained — and here the second great wrong answer waits, more respectable than abolition and almost as futile. It is the hope of constraint by *virtue*: find a good ruler, cultivate a wise and self-restraining elite, enlighten the population, and the coordinator will decline to dominate because its character or its education forbids it. Every tradition has reached for this — the philosopher-king, the virtuous republic, the New Soviet Man, the well-informed democratic citizen — and it fails for one structural reason that no amount of moral exhortation repairs: it asks the powerful to act against their own position, and position-logic guarantees that, in the aggregate and over time, they will not. A good individual ruler may indeed restrain himself; but a system that depends on the ruler being good is a system that has wagered everything on a variable it cannot control, and it will draw a bad ruler soon enough, and then the restraint that lived only in character is simply gone, with no structure left to replace it. Virtue is not load-bearing. You cannot build a durable order on the hope of good character at the top, because character does not transmit reliably across successions and does not survive contact with sustained temptation. The decisive recognition — and it is the hinge of the entire constructive turn — was Madison's: that a government must be made to work even when run by people who are not angels, that *if men were angels no government would be necessary*, and that since they are not, the only durable constraint is one that does not rely on their goodness but harnesses their self-interest. The constraint has to be in the structure, not in the soul. Asking the apex to be good is not a plan. It is the absence of one.

PART V

CONSTRAINT BY STRUCTURE

The answer that has actually worked: not to find a coordinator who will not dominate but to build a field in which domination does not pay; and the Anglo case as the proof that the constraint was structural the whole way down, requiring no one to be good

Make Domination Too Expensive

The answer that has actually worked, wherever and to whatever degree it has worked, is not to find a coordinator who will not dominate but to build a field in which domination *does not pay* — in which no single position can dominate because the others would have to consent and will not, and in which the ruler is bound by a canon he cannot repudiate without sawing off the branch he sits on. This is the constructive content of the whole diagnosis turned to use. The framework showed that the apex rents its legitimacy from the canon and is bound by it; that loaded words, once universal, outrun their authors and can be turned back; that an interpreter class with its own base can pry the apex with the apex's own words. Each of these, a vulnerability of the coordinator, is a *lever of constraint* for the field.

The Proof That Ran on No One's Virtue

The Anglo case is the proof of concept, and its lesson is precisely that it did not run on virtue. The English barons, merchants, jurists, and townsmen who bound their kings were not better men than the subjects of the absolutisms; their field merely happened to contain power-centres — armed nobles, a parliament with the purse, courts with their own standing, chartered towns, a church with its own apex — that no king could fully swallow, so that domination by any one of them required a consent the others would not give. Into that standoff the loaded words were written, and the ruler, bound by the canon he ruled through, could not stop them from outrunning their authors into the liberty of the ruled. The constraint was structural the whole way down. No one had to be good. The field had to be plural, and predation had to cost more than it returned. You do not get a constrained coordinator by finding a virtuous one. You get it by building a field where domination is too expensive to attempt.

PART VI

THE THREE LEVERS

The design levers that separate the constrained coordinator from the dominator, each with a name in this framework and a serious body of empirical work behind it: plural counterweights, open access, and debuggability — with Ostrom's principles as the standing proof the dilemma is solvable

Plural Counterweights

The first and most basic lever is the existence of multiple independent power-centres that the coordinator cannot absorb: courts with their own standing, a press the apex does not control, classes with independent resources, rival parties, separate jurisdictions, federated authorities, an interpreter class banked outside the throne. Where these exist, pressure releases as reform and the apex is checked by the simple fact that it cannot move against one centre without the others resisting; where they are foreclosed — bought, absorbed, or never permitted to form — pressure stores and ruptures, and the rupture reloads the foreclosed shape. This is the framework's axis of *plurality against foreclosure*, and it is the same insight Madison built the American structure around: ambition made to counteract ambition, the standoff doing the work that no ruler's character could. The design imperative is to multiply and protect the counterweights, and above all to prevent their capture, because a counterweight the apex has quietly bought is worse than none, since it now lends the apex its independent-seeming authority.

Open Access

The second lever is the one the economic historians North, Wallis, and Weingast named most precisely, and it sharpens the first. Most orders in history have been what they call *limited-access orders* or "natural states": the elites secure social peace by limiting access to organisations, offices, and economic opportunity, creating rents that they divide among themselves, so that each powerful faction has more to gain from cooperating in the spoils than from fighting — order purchased at the price of domination, stability bought with monopoly. The alternative is the *open-access order*, in which the constraint on elites is not their restraint and not a balance of plunder but *open competition* — economic and political entry available impersonally to anyone who meets known criteria, so that no elite can wall off its position, and any incumbent who exploits too grossly is displaced by a competitor rather than tolerated by colleagues. The design imperative here is to keep access open — to fight the perennial drift by which incumbents convert open competition back into monopoly and

rent, which is the master move of elite capture and the thing that quietly turns an open order back into a natural state while all the forms remain in place.

Debuggability

The third lever is the framework's own discriminating axis, *tested against revealed*, applied to institutions rather than creeds. An institution that can be corrected — that treats its failures as information to be acted on, that has live mechanisms for revision, that does not sacralise its current arrangement as the final and perfect one — can learn, adapt, and shed its mistakes without rupture. An institution that immunises itself, that reads every failure as the faithful's infidelity rather than a defect to be fixed, can only demand more fidelity or break. Self-correcting orders outlast and stay healthier than self-immunising ones, for the same reason tested beliefs outlast revealed ones: error that can be named can be removed, and error that cannot be named accumulates until it ruptures the whole. The design imperative is to keep the institutions debuggable — to resist the sacralising of any particular arrangement, including the good ones, because the moment an arrangement is placed beyond revision it begins to rot in place.

The Empirical Floor

Running beneath all three is an empirical floor that proves the dilemma soluble. Elinor Ostrom spent a career demonstrating that real communities do solve the coordination-without-domination problem at human scale, governing shared resources for generations without either a dominating central state or pure privatisation, and she derived from the successful cases actual design principles — clear boundaries, rules matched to local conditions, those affected sharing in making the rules, monitoring by the users themselves or by people accountable to them, graduated sanctions rather than all-or-nothing punishment, accessible conflict-resolution, recognition of the group's right to organise, and nested layers of authority for larger systems. Her work is the standing proof that the dilemma is not unsolvable, only unsolved-in-general — that coordination without domination is achievable, has been achieved, and has knowable conditions. The three levers are the structural skeleton; Ostrom's principles are what the skeleton looks like when it is actually built and working.

PART VII

LIBERAL DEMOCRACY, DIAGNOSED

The most successful approximation of the constrained coordinator the modern world has produced, and the one most endangered by misunderstanding itself; the load-bearing-belief insight turned inside out

The Machinery, Not the Self-Story

The liberal-democratic order deserves a clear-eyed place in this account, because it is the most successful approximation of the constrained coordinator the modern world has produced and also the one most endangered by misunderstanding itself. Its real achievement was never the thing its own self-story celebrates. The self-story says: we enlightened the population, we recognised universal reason and rights, and freedom followed from the enlightenment. That is not what holds it up. What holds it up is the institutional machinery — the separation of powers, the independent judiciary, the free press, the regular elections, the federal divisions, the impersonal rule of law — which happens to *instantiate* the three levers above: plural counterweights, open access, and debuggable institutions, mostly without admitting that this, and not the enlightenment, is the source of its liberty.

The Error Turned Inside Out

The danger follows directly, and it is the load-bearing-belief insight turned inside out. Where most managed-belief systems *over*rate the role of their creed — treating a structural arrangement as the eternal grain of reality — the liberal order makes the opposite error: it *under*rates how much its freedom rests on structure rather than on virtue and values, and so it permits the structure to decay while congratulating itself on its enlightenment. It lets the counterweights be captured, the access be quietly closed, the institutions be sacralised or hollowed, all the while reciting the values as though the values were what held the roof up. They are not. The values were never load-bearing. The counterweights were. A liberal order can keep every word of its self-story and lose every structural condition of its liberty, and it will not notice, because it was watching the wrong thing the whole time.

PART VIII

WHY IT IS NEVER SOLVED, ONLY GARDENED

The hardest part of the program to accept, and the part that separates it from every utopia: that the constrained order has no terminal state but must be maintained continuously against a gradient that always slopes back toward foreclosure

The Gradient Back Toward Foreclosure

The hardest part of the constructive program to accept, and the part that separates it from every utopia, is that it has no terminal state. The well-constrained coordinating order is not a thing you build once and then possess; it is a thing you maintain continuously against a structural gradient that always slopes back toward foreclosure, and the maintenance can always fail. The counterweights decay: elites capture the institutions meant to check them, converting independent courts and presses and parties into instruments or ornaments. The binding canon is reinterpreted: the loaded words that once constrained the apex are read down, hollowed, or turned, by the interpreter class the apex has learned to staff. Open access silts back into monopoly as incumbents wall off their positions. And standing ready at every moment is the permanent emergency, which is the universal solvent of constraint — for there is no check so well built that "we must act faster than the check allows, the enemy is at the gate" cannot dissolve it, and there is always an enemy, real or manufactured, available to supply the pretext.

The Garden, Not the Monument

Beneath all of this runs the slow structural tide that Turchin's work on secular cycles describes: even healthy orders breed, over generations, more elite aspirants than there are elite positions to hold them, and the resulting intra-elite competition corrodes the cooperative norms and drives the order toward a crisis on something like a schedule, regardless of anyone's intentions. So there is no architecture that, once raised, stands on its own. There is only gardening — the continuous, never-finished work of protecting the counterweights, keeping the access open, holding the institutions debuggable, and refusing the emergency its standing invitation to consolidate. The order is a garden, not a monument, and a garden left untended does not stay as it was. It reverts.

PART IX

THE MOVING GROUND

Where the genuinely unbuilt work lies: the three shifts that strain every tool — the scale of modern coordination, the standing alibi of speed, and the new machinery of the belief-dial itself

Scale and Speed

The ground under the design problem is itself moving, which is where the genuinely unbuilt work lies and where a later hand should dig. Three shifts in particular strain every tool described above. The first is *scale*: the plural, deliberative, access-open institutions that constrain a coordinator were mostly worked out for polities far smaller than the planetary systems of production, finance, and ecology that now require coordination, and it is an open question whether counterweight-based constraint can be built at the scale the coordination now demands, or whether scale itself favours the dominator. The second is *speed*: the tempo of economy, technology, climate, and contagion keeps generating, with real justification, the argument that we must act faster than plural checks can allow — and that argument is domination's oldest and widest doorway, so that the acceleration of everything is, structurally, a standing pressure toward the foreclosure of constraint in the name of necessity.

The Dial in New Hands

The third shift, and the deepest, is that the *belief-dial itself has acquired new machinery.* The managed belief on which every coordinator's cheap legitimacy rests was always installed and maintained by an interpreter class; but mass media, recommendation algorithms, and now artificial intelligence are a new interpreter class of unprecedented reach and opacity, and the question of *who turns the belief-dial, by what authority, and how they can be constrained* is wide open and barely formulated. The framework diagnoses the dial with precision. It does not yet say who should be permitted near it, or what counterweight could check a power that shapes the formation of belief at scale and at speed. That is perhaps the central unbuilt problem of the present, and it is the one most worth the work, because a coordinator that controls the belief-dial directly has acquired the one capacity that could foreclose constraint permanently — the power to form the population that would otherwise be the check.

PART X

THE POSTURE AS PROGRAM

Why the project's closing posture is not resignation but the constructive program stated as a discipline, and the only one that survives contact with the dynamics; and the size of what rides on the fine line

Architecture Versus Gardening

It should now be clear that the project's closing posture — *debug, do not defend; gardening, not architecture; tested, not revealed* — is not a counsel of resignation but the constructive program stated as a discipline, and the only program that survives contact with the dynamics. The utopians wanted architecture: the final, perfect, hierarchy-free order, designed once, declared complete, and thereafter defended against all comers. They got the worst tyrannies in the record, and not by accident, because a thing declared finished and perfect is a thing that has *sacralised itself* and thereby foreclosed its own correction — it has become a revealed order, and revealed orders cannot debug, they can only demand fidelity or break. The realist alternative is not a smaller or sadder dream. It is the recognition that the coordinator is permanent and necessary, that its tendency to dominate is permanent and structural, and that the gap between the two is held open not once but every single day, by keeping the field plural, the access open, the institutions debuggable, and the canon binding on the people who rule through it.

The Stake on the Line

There is no final state. There is only better and worse gardening, forever. And the reason this is worth a life's work rather than a shrug is the size of what rides on it: the distance between a well-gardened coordinating order and a foreclosed predatory one is very nearly the distance between most of the flourishing and most of the suffering in the whole human record. That is the stake on the fine line. The coordinator cannot be abolished; it can only be constrained; the constraint is structural, never moral; it is never finished, only maintained; and the maintaining of it, against the permanent gradient back toward domination, is the highest and most consequential work there is. This is the constructive face of the diagnosis: the task is not to escape the machine but to garden it — holding a coordinator strong enough to feed the people and weak enough not to eat them, on a line that must be walked anew every day. What is known is set down here; what is not known, and most needs building — constraint at planetary scale, constraint against the alibi of speed, and the constraint of whoever now

turns the belief-dial — is marked for the hand that comes next. Carry it further. Debug, do not defend. Gardening, not architecture. Tested, not revealed.

A Note on Sources

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This is a constructive framework study rather than a documentary case study, and its empirical claims point to standing bodies of work rather than to contested particulars; it is held, like everything in the project, as tested and not revealed.

On constraint by structure rather than virtue: James Madison, especially ‘Federalist’ No. 51 — that if men were angels no government would be necessary, and that ambition must be made to counteract ambition. On coordination without domination at human scale: Elinor Ostrom, ‘Governing the Commons’ (1990), and her design principles for enduring common-pool-resource institutions — defined boundaries, locally matched rules, collective-choice arrangements, monitoring accountable to the users, graduated sanctions, accessible conflict-resolution, recognised rights to organise, and nested authority. On the distinction between limited-access and open-access orders: Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast, ‘Violence and Social Orders’ (2009), on the ‘natural state’ that orders violence by limiting access and dividing rents against the open-access order that constrains elites by competition and impersonal institutions. On the structural tide toward crisis: Peter Turchin’s work on secular cycles and elite overproduction (‘structural-demographic theory’).

The framework on which the study rests — the metabolic trap, position-logic, the managed belief and its load-bearing role, the canon that once sacralised is sealed, the loaded words that outrun their authors, the interpreter class, the permanent emergency, and the discriminating axis of the tested against the revealed — is stated in the project’s foundational papers, above all ‘The Standing Frame’, ‘The Machine That Runs Itself’, and ‘The Tested and the Revealed’, and worked in the companion notes ‘The Unpaid Guard’ and ‘The Rented Throne’, the control study ‘The Sincere Machine’, and the coda ‘What Is to Be Done’. This study is their constructive completion, and like them it is offered to be corrected and carried further.